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Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights


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Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

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Abstract:

Public hospitals in Greece are understaffed and the situation has seriously worsened with the economic crises, the increased arrival of refugees/migrants and the COVID-19 pandemic. The high rates of Caesarean Sections (CS) in the country demonstrate the lack of use of international obstetric protocols, national strategies, CS audits and the lack of midwifery-led maternal and neonatal care. Evidence shows that Greek women including refugee/migrants face high levels of obstetric violence, such as being subjected to CS and a total lack of informed consent to any medical act during labour. Sexual health indicators in the country provide a picture of a population that faces various sexual health-related problems. Greeks seem to use abortion as a contraceptive method, often practice unsafe sex, have generally erroneous knowledge about contraception methods and other sexual-related issues, face infertility problems and report many cases of sexual abuse in adults, including children. Moreover, to a great extent, they attribute the gaps to inadequate knowledge, as well as particular behaviors (unprotected sex), and attitudes (lack of negotiation), to the absence of systematic, structured, school-based sex education.

1. Country Context on SRHR

In Greece the pandemic has been recognized as a crisis by the Ministry of Health. Many years of austerity saw national healthcare expenses cut by three-quarter, almost leading to its collapse. Indicatively, there are only 0.3 obstetricians and gynecologists per 1,000 people for more than five million women¹, and according to the president of Hellenic Midwives Association the maternity wards in the hospitals are understaffed. Greece also faces a great demographic problem because of the low birth rate and aging of the population. As for June, 2022 the Greek government increased the age limit to 54 for those who choose to use assisted reproduction treatments (including IVF) to become mothers². Moreover, Greece continues having **a high percentage of maternal deliveries that resort to CS**³. The pathologies of the health system in the field of Obstetrics have been evident since the first decade of the 2000s, and researches have indicated that the financial motivation of the OB/Gyn doctor has replaced the individual choice of women regarding the plan and

¹ Hellenic Statistical Authority, [Greece in Figures: October-December 2020](#), p.13

² Article 3 of Law 4958/2022 (Official Gazette A' 142/21.07.2022).

³[Greece commits to addressing excessive reliance on caesarean sections](#).

course of their childbirth. In 2020, out of total deliveries (84.767) 56,8% were performed by CS, as a result, about 6 in 10 Greek, migrant and refugee women give birth by CS.

It is indicative that in Greece the lack of disaggregated data provides a challenge in allowing for targeted measures to best tackle gender inequality. For example, data on women and girls SRH, and the situation of Roma women and women with disabilities is also largely unavailable. Child marriage continues to be allowed in the country under specific conditions, and the vast majority of those married under the age of 18 were girls. Additionally, there are no statistics on child marriage and its prevalence among the refugee and asylum-seeking population within Greece. However, girls and women from these communities are at a 25 to 45% risk of female genital mutilation (FGM), specifically those from areas where FGM is practiced⁴. FGM is a relatively new issue for Greece, about which the state knows very little. The only Service that carries out a rudimentary registration and if the women request it as a reason for granting asylum, is the Asylum Service. The Greek health system do not have a specific classification of the causes that lead to a CS in case the mother has undergone any of the types of FGM. Beyond the necessity of studying FGM in Greece the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence⁵ will rise to **the obligation of political interventions for this specific harmful cultural practice**. Another important issue for the specific population, is the lack of interpretation/translation at the main public hospitals.

Greece has the highest rate of abortions upon request among EU members, indicating that this could be used as a form of Family Planning (FP) instead of contraceptives⁶. According to the data presented during the 7th Panhellenic Conference of FP organised by the Greek Society for FP, Birth Control and Reproductive Health on October 17-18, 2015 in Athens, the economic crisis in Greece resulted in the growth of abortions number. While near 2005 there were 200 000 abortions per year, in 2015 the number has grown to 300 000. The experts estimated that at that time 140 in 1.000 pregnancies end in abortion⁷. It should be recalled that regarding the issue of abortions, the Holy Synod has established POTE ("NEVER") the "Day of the Unborn Child". The first Sunday after Christmas was chosen as a day to commemorate the position of the Greek Church against abortion, while the permanent position of the Holy Synod is that "voluntary abortion is murder". It worth mentioning that the official name of the Greek Ministry of Education is "Ministry of National Education and Religions". The influence of the Orthodox Church to decisions about educational affairs, contents and issues becomes very clear when examining the case of Religion as a school subject, opposing beliefs among the state, society

⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality, [Greece](#)

⁵ [Istanbul Convention](#).

⁶ UN General Assembly: Human Rights Council, [Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#), 2020, p.15

⁷ Tsimitakis M., [Abortions up 50 percent in Greece since the start of the crisis](#), accessed 24.08.2020.

and the church cause the greatest difficulties in educating young people about sexuality issues. However, sex education was introduced into school curriculum as of the school year 2021-2022, starting for children at the age of 6 although there are major gaps reported in instruction⁸. In terms of curricula, gender equality, sexual orientation, and gender identity are integrated into democratic citizenship or religion classes, yet the scope of the topics is often limited, underdeveloped, and/or implemented in an ad-hoc manner under teachers willing⁹.

In Greece, the use of contraceptives is very low even with its ease of availability, with only 54% of women 15 to 49 years old (74% among women married or in union) using any form of contraceptive and 38% (50% for women married or in union) using a modern form of contraceptive. Even with the low use of contraceptive, only 6% of women (7% for women married or in union) have unmet needs for FP. Adolescent pregnancy in Greece is relatively low, with a rate of about 6.9% in 2018¹⁰. There is no information available on the rate of adolescent pregnancy among Romani girls or those of other ethnic minority backgrounds. In case women request of tuba ligation a signed and express consent needs to be given by spouses and/or partners for the woman to have access to tuba ligation. This particular practice, which is adopted both in public and in the private sector, causes concern for agencies and the feminist movement in Greece, as it is violating human rights. Regarding the use of a condom, in a research carried on by the Greek University Mental Health, Neurosciences and Precision Medicine during the period 2018 - 2020 the percentage of 15-year-olds who report condom use drops significantly from 86.9% to 75.6% as one of the main results **of the constant increase of condoms prices in Greece**¹¹.

Contraception access for refugee/migrant women in Greece remains a subject with a low-response among governments and NGOs. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic several Public Hospitals used as reasoning the circular of the Ministry of Health on the subject of "Instructions to the hospital to limit scheduled regular surgeries, regular outpatient clinics and evening clinics" to deny services characterizing a request for termination of pregnancy as non-urgent¹². Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF), which is the largest provider of the SRH services, do also consults the Greek government and lobby about the changes that need to be made to improve women' and girls' access to the SRH services. The contraception methods commonly used by women before being displaced like **injectable contraceptives (Depo-provera) and implants are not available for them and illegal to be**

⁸ European Parliament: Directorate General for Internal Policies, [Policies for Sexual Education in the European Union](#), 2013. p.20; UN General Assembly: Human Rights Council, [Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#), 2020., p.10.

⁹ Gender Country Profile 2021, UNICEF country office in Greece.

¹⁰ World Bank Data, Greece: Gender Statistics; UNICEF, [Greece Situation Analysis](#), p.46.

¹¹ Newspaper, Kathimerini, article, [Condom use is dropping among Greek teens, survey shows](#).

¹² Information obtained by Greek [NGO Diotima](#), Centre for Gender Rights & Equality,

imported or sold in Greece¹³. On a pilot survey which was conducted in 2021 in the context of a midwife thesis, out of 120 refugee women and girls (the youngest participant was 16 years old and the oldest 54 years old), stated that during their time in Greece 15.8% of them use or have used the contraceptive injection. When they were asked on where did you find the preferred methods of contraception, 65.8% of women stated that the specific contraceptive method they use was obtained from an NGO, 14% from someone else, 10.5% from a Public Hospital and 6.1% from a private doctor¹⁴. Access to abortion services in a time effective manner for refugee and migrant women depend on the good will of the hospital personnel and on personal contacts among NGOs and hospitals. Moreover, since medical abortions¹⁵ are rarely performed in Greece, the 40 days limitation, during which an abortion is acceptable by the Koran, is impossible to respect with a surgical abortion.

In regards to HIV according to the UNAIDS database, in 2019 in Greece, 13 000 people were living with HIV aware of their status¹⁶. During the financial crisis, the Greek Ministry of Health defined as a priority among others to improve the quality of SRH health services for women who injected drug. Regarding the sexual health and rights, the Greek authorities do not conduct official HIV prevalence surveys or HIV estimates among commercial sex workers¹⁷. At the same time, the Greek government obliges migrant sex workers to undergo an HIV test, which some experts see as a discriminatory practice enhancing prejudices about migrants¹⁸. Moreover, there is no quantitative data on the prevalence of STIs in the refugee camps in Greece, since syndromic diagnosis is predominantly used and up to this moment no HIV rapid tests are provided from the Ministry of Health. Cases including pregnant women are referred to public hospitals for HIV testing. In case of positivity, especially for the patients at the Reception and Identification Centers (RIC) in Greek islands, HIV treatment is not provided directly, and patients have to be moved after the lifting of geographical restriction in the capital of Athens in order to have access.

SGBV has been the subject of heated debate during the last two years, with the national [“#MeToo”](#) movement being raised in the country. In May, 2021 government passed a controversial family law¹⁹, despite the risk that the law poses to women and children who are survivors of domestic violence. In March, the local NGO Diotima²⁰

¹³ Holman Z., [Reproductive rights on the move: refugee women in Greece struggle to access contraception](#), accessed 25.08.2020.

¹⁴ ERIKETI KOKKOSI, Midwife POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMATIC THESIS on "Availability of contraceptive methods in the Greek refugee camps - Their application and acceptance based on questionnaires. »

¹⁵ Medical abortion or abortion pill is a type of non-surgical abortion in which abortifacient pharmaceutical drugs are used to induce abortion.

¹⁶ UNAIDS, [Greece](#), accessed 26.08.2020. *Joint technical mission: HIV in Greece 28–29 May 2012*,

¹⁷ Joint technical mission: [HIV in Greece](#) 28–29 May 2012, accessed 26.08.2020, p. 6.

¹⁸ [The Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights of Undocumented Migrants. Narrowing the Gap between their Rights and the Reality in the EU](#), accessed 26.08.2020, p. 7.

¹⁹ Human Right Watch, [Greece: Custody Bill Puts Women, Children at Risk](#).

²⁰ [Diotima](#), Centre for Gender Rights & Equality.

noted that during the pandemic there was an increase in reported incidents of GBV. At least 11 women have been murdered by their current or former husbands or partners in the first nine months of the year. At the 2020 Annual Report on Violence Against Women of the General Secretariat for Demography and Family Policy and Gender Equality (GSDFPGE)²¹ domestic violence was reported the most prevalent type of GBV at the Counselling Centres across the territory.

2. Policy Debate on SRHR

As for the national action plan on SRH, year 2008 was an elaborate national plan of action was promulgated, valid for a five-year period (2008-2012), with no results published on said priorities and actions. At the National Action Plan on Gender Equality for the program period 2021-2025 there are two priority provisions in specific, on the study on the SRHR for refugee women in Greece and on informing Roma populations about early and forced marriages and the provisions of Greek law, as well as about children's rights. In November, 2022 in a public debate on the law on Obstetric Care, the Ministry of Health announced the creation of National Birth Centres within the public hospitals (maternity wards) under the medical supervision/management of Ob/Gyns, while it is globally accepted that birth Centres are Midwifery Lead Units. Additionally, on the said action plan the Ministry is referring to home midwifery care to be assisted by health professionals with related professional rights without specifying the importance of the community midwives. The Independent Midwives rejected both articles 36²² and 37²³ and finally the ministry passed the new Birth Centres to Hospitals Midwifery Directorate and Management. However, future data on numbers of CSs in the country will show if the law is been implemented in practice.

3. Good Practices on SRHR

In 2017 up to early 2019 the Hellenic National Health Organisation in order to **increase access of refugee and migrant population placed translators at the main public hospitals of areas with high population of said community**. The initiative was financially supported by the programme "PHILOS – Emergency health response to refugee crisis" a programme of the Greek Ministry of Health. Additionally, up to now the GSDFPGE in order to meet the needs of refugee and migrant women survivors of GBV in partnership with UNICEF, the Research Centre for Gender Equality (KETHI) and the local NGO METAdrasi provides **interpretation services at the Network of Structures**. Additionally, at the 2021 report on gender equality in the EU the **SURVIVOR Project** (implementing period 2019-2021) in Greece, co-financed

²¹ [Annual Report on Violence Against Women's](#), 2021, GSDFPGE.

²² [REGULATIONS FOR OBSTETRIC CARE Article 36](#).

²³ [REGULATIONS FOR OBSTETRIC Article 37](#).

by the EU's Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, implemented by the GSDFPGE, IRC, KETHI and Diotima, has been improving services for refugee and migrant survivors of GBV in Greece. The [Survivor Website](#) provides toolkits and other resources for agencies and practitioners in Europe supporting the integration and resettlement of refugees²⁴. The adaptation of the [GBV Pocket Guide App](#) in the Greek language which was produced in 2022 with the financial support from UNICEF and the GSDFPGE has been adapted for the Greek context based on [the original English version of a globally endorsed interagency resource](#). The GBV PG app is targeted towards all professionals and individuals on how to support a survivors of GBV that discloses to them an incident of violence.

In the field of sex education "**Play with Frixos**²⁵" a Relationships, Health and Sexuality Education program for Pre-school and early Primary school age children has received the award for Excellence & Innovation in Sexuality Education 2019, by the World Association for Sexual Health. Moreover the "**Student Awareness Programme on Contraception and Sexual Education**" implemented by the GSDFPGE and midwives from a public hospital, during the school year 2021-2022 2.223 student attended ²⁶.

4. Transferability of the good practices on SRHR

Greece could benefit from the experience that France has gained on the FGM monitoring data tool. Additionally the initiative of France on the **national toll-free number** on "Sexuality, contraception, and abortion" and the initiative of Belgium on **the web-based questionnaire** that provides information and assistance could benefit as well young people and adults in Greece. Moreover, the strategy on providing free of charge condoms to adolescents and young people and the **reimbursement of contraception being available** to everyone regardless of gender (trans-inclusive) could increase the use of contraception methods in the country.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

For the better organisation and quality of Obstetric services in Greece, there is the need of establishment of a National Midwifery Council, including **an Obstetrics Directorate at the Ministry of Health**. Specific **laws against Obstetric Violence must be considered in Greece** and the creation of an **Observatory for Obstetric**

²⁴ [2021 report on gender equality in the EU](#).

²⁵ [I play with Frixo and learn about my body and the Interpersonal relationships](#).

²⁶ [8th Newsletter Report of the GSDFPGE](#).

Violence. In regards to contraception the Ministry of Health must consider to provide all modern methods including injectables and implants. Free access to counselling and contraception methods should be available for all women and girls in the country. Taking in to account the high population of women and girls refugee and migrants, there is a mandate **on having a data collection tool for all types of FGM at the antenatal centres and maternity wards.** It is also important to inform those women about Greek law, which prohibits all forms of FGM.

Finally, in regards to sexual education, **the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education should collaborate with CSOs** and other specialised agencies in order to design, implement and evaluate projects related to information, education and communication activities with target group the school community, including parents on topics related to sex and sexuality, contraception, safe abortion, reproductive health, Gender identity and equality, GBV etc.